

## **Continuity and Change**

By John Noble

I thought revival had broken out! I finished my talk on Ephesians at the local Elim Pentecostal youth meeting, made the appeal and almost the whole group came forward. There was shouting, crying and general mayhem and right in the middle of it all was young Norman Barnes seeking God for everything he could get. I thought I'd arrived, Billy Graham move over John Noble's taken over – you wish!

What I didn't know at the time was that the mini busload of black Christians, who arrived half way through my talk, responded to every appeal on offer. Like Norman they wanted all that was going, they didn't intend to miss the smallest blessing. No wonder the black majority churches in the UK are the fastest growing churches in the British Isles today.

That evening was my first meeting with Norman who was just 17 years old and he seems to be as hungry and enthusiastic for God now as he was all those years ago. It was the beginning of a long, although not always easy, relationship which still stands almost half a century on. So, what's the secret that has kept us loving, talking, praying and sometimes scrapping one another for so long?

It's difficult to say really but I guess at the heart of it has been the dogged belief that what God brought together we mere mortals should not break apart. That's not to say that we haven't suffered huge disappointments and been massively frustrated with one another at times but we've always come back for more. The sense that we made a divine connection is, I believe, what kept us in relationship and kept Links alive and moving from strength to strength since Norman made his first trip to Ghana in 1979, when the seed thought of Links was sown in Norman's mind and heart.

One phrase that Norman picked up from Bob Mumford ages back and quickly made his own was, 'constant change is here to stay'. Norman quickly learned that God does not stand still and it's up to us to keep up with him. As the Lord also said to Bob Mumford, "Bob, you and I are incompatible and I don't change!" So, we need to find out what God's up to and flow with him. A familiar verse in Isaiah 43:19 says, 'look I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?' And the answer is that actually we struggle to understand God's ways but our future involvement in his purposes depends on us seeing what he is doing and joining in.

The strange thing is that God's new thing is always the same. He uses different means to reach the same end, which really confuses us. But the end is always the same – 'a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland', in other words ordinary people getting truly blessed! The, "we've always done it this way" brigade immediately miss the point and therefore the blessing, for God has a thousand different ways to bless and reach needy people but his heart of love is always the motivation. Thus the apostle Paul is able to say, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" 1 Corinthians 9:22. The end is salvation of the lost, the means are manifold.

So, with God it's all change, all the time, so that the unchanging message can reach those its intended for. I have always been amazed at how inflexible mature Christians are. We expect the whole world to adapt to us and our ways, when it is we who should be finding out how to 'scratch where they are itching'. That's why I love Norman and his lovely wife Grace. They're not so young these days but they have their spiritual ears to the ground as far as Links is concerned and have made way for God's 'new thing' in the form of two younger men – Rich Hubbard and Joe Gisbey.

To me it's fantastic that Norman and Grace did not hold on to their position in Links through insecurity, but made room for the next generations - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, working together, they have modelled the word. Of course, Rich and Joe have played their part by not grasping for promotion but rather humbly serving and in this way they gained the trust and respect of the whole Links team. So Norman and Grace felt comfortable to hand over the controls and were able to encourage the younger guys to take responsibility.

The analogy of handing over the baton has been used and I understand the thinking behind that. However, I've not been entirely comfortable with the imagery of one dropping out, as in a relay, and the others taking over full responsibility for the rest of the race. I think the reason is that, in our Kingdom relationship to Jesus, we never fully retire, we only receive fresh instructions for the battle. I'll never forget Tom Brock, our ministry friend from California, saying at one of our Pioneer leaders' conferences, "I've got no baton to pass on, but draw alongside me and I'll light your torch with mine!" If that happens we both continue running and fulfilling God's purposes for our lives albeit in a fresh way or in a different function.

So, a Godly transition is taking place in Links which was conceived by the Holy Spirit, embraced by those involved and implemented by the board, thus securing the long term future of an organisation which was born out of a heart to serve the poor and underprivileged. Malachi 3:6 says, "I the Lord do not change" - that's consistency! However, we change and our circumstances change, that's why God does new things in order to release his unchanging word and work in fresh ways. This can often upset our 'applecart' if we're unprepared. So let us hold fast to those things which the Lord has given as permanent and lasting, like love, respect and relationships, and reach out for his 'new thing' where we will all find greater freedom and fulfilment than ever. Rock on Norman and Grace, Rich and Joe and long may Links live to love some more in those far away places.

John Noble  
Chairman 1995 - 2006

John Noble a 'father figure' in the New Church movement, leads spiritconnect, a relational network of churches and ministries, with his wife Christine. He recently stood down as Chairman of the National Charismatic Leaders Conference 'Charismata' after 22 years service and has authored a number of books including his latest 'The Shaking.'